DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 090 571 CS 201 252

AUTHOR Broer, Lawrence R.
TITLE The Human Prospect in Freshman English: A Winter's Tale.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (Philadelphia, April 19-20, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *College Freshmen; *College Programs; Composition (Literary); Creative Writing; *English Instruction; Human Dignity; Humanism; Humanization; Imagination; *Literature

ABSTRACT

As a means of arguing the conviction that the teaching of imaginative literature in composition classes may prove an invaluable tool for the survival of human dignity, the following remarks were circulated among English department members. Although the relatively intangible benefits of literature and the subtlety of its processes make it more difficult to teach, what greater service could be rendered the young student than to enlarge his sympathies and understanding of others in this dehumanized age through literature study? Good literature promotes self-awareness and the realization that material possessions are inadequate for satisfying the human spirit--truth and beauty are the humanizing factors. Literature study also stimulates the teaching of composition skills by providing examples of lively, colorful, compassionate, creative writing. Rather than an escape from life, imaginative literature is an escape into life. (JM)

ED 090571

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lawrence R. Broer
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

The Human Prospect in Freshman English: A Winter's Tale

Lawrence R. Broer

When I first circulated the diatribe that follows to members of my English Department, the most confirmed cynic among us responded to me in part in this fashion.

> I liked your paper very much. As you said it is indeed "old stuff" but as you point out that is precisely what literature is about: "old studd" (I'll let the typo stand because the notion "powerful" was drifting through my head and one may question my associating power with "Studd" but they can hardly quibble with the notion that literature is powerful) like love, honor and dignity. Your paper is simple, direct and true. The question immediately came to my mind not "why did he write it" but "isn't it sad that he found it necessary to write it." I was reminded of working with Camus' The Rebel some years ago. The book is a long impassioned plea for moderation. After having worked with it for some time, it occurred to me that it was odd that that was really all the book said: human beings must be moderate. Then I realized how stupid or rather how enmeshed in the sick world I was (it was so sick I didn't really see how sick it was (now I know the sickness is fathomless and I will never know and can never imagine how deep it goes) to see the point of all that. Excess was so prominent and so common and so overlooked that "the imbecile criminal seems positively refreshing in comparison with our highly intelligent executioneers." What else could a decent person do under the circumstances; what other moral position could he take. But how absurd to be reduced to a historical and philosophical argument against excess and for moderation. Is it necessary to take a position for the ten commandments? Yes. "True, 'tis pity and pity 'tis 'tis true." It was in no other country and all the animals are very much animal and alive. I would like to think your letter was unnecessary. Must one really argue for the inclusion of literature in Freshman English? I hope you're wrong but something tells me you're not. Your letter was a winter's tale. Sad tales are best for winter. But I hope it has the necessary effect.

Bless Howard Gowen. One effect I sought in writing this paper was purely therapeutic--an old fashioned venting of spleen. I needed to off-set the frustration and indignation I felt as a vastly outweighed junior member of

CS 201 852

the Freshman English committee, whose voice, against the presentiments of older, established heads, had proved as puny as his salary. But the larger effect I sought was to alert the English Department to the secret and, I felt, devious workings of our committee which was about to abolish all traces of imaginative literature from our composition classes. I wanted, in effect, to try my case in open court: to argue that far from being elitist or irrelevant or in any way remote from practical human problems, imaginative literature may be one of the most valuable tools we have for dealing with the most practical human problem of all--that of human survival, certainly survival with dignity.

My interaction with the committee had been disappointingly eye-opening. What dismayed me most was to learn that those people who by virtue of seniority were about to dictate policy had simply ceased to believe any longer in the value of their work. Having battled for too many years with hostile adminstrators and antagonistic students, and now informed by everyone from college administrators to literary critics that the written word is obsolete in any case, they had finally capitulated to the standard criticism of their profession that poems, stories, novels and plays are irrelevant to the student's real life needs. But better capitulation through weariness than insincereity. We worked in an atmosphere of fear and conciliation. The lopped heads of Deans and department chairmen whose policies ran counter to the new Administration had grown in number, and the blood from the execution of our own Dean of Language-Literature, a man eminently qualified as scholar and administrator, was still very fresh. So it was not strange that the thrust of the committee should be to design a program guaranteed not to offend the utilitarian sensibilities of

the University's President who had charged us with making a convincing claim for the continued existence of our composition courses. There were at best subdued smiles at the reminder that the President had begun his undergraduate years as an English major but had quickly become disenchanted and gone instead into law. But there were no smiles at all when during the committee's first head to head with the President, he asked us: did not we honestly believe that movies were a better form of communication than novels (his examples argued the opposite, but could he be playing Devil's Advocate, we hoped?), and that given the prominence of mass media, did we not agree that it was no longer necessary to teach writing skills (our hope collapsed)?

The conditions that originally provoked this paper into being have since worsened steadily. I now feel that its writing, its mere rehashing of old truths, is part of what Norman Mailer has called "a new tide of a new responsibility, the responsibility to educate a nation that laps at the feet." It is the responsibility to reassert, in the face of an increasingly manipulative and dehumanizing technocracy, the power of art to clarify and humanize our lives. "The exactness of science has an importance which is not likely to be underestimated," says Iris Murdoch. "But the study of a language or a literature or any study that will increase and refine our ability to be through words is part of a battle for civilization and justice and freedom, for clarity and truth."

The grand irony for those who teach in the Humanities today is that their existence is most threatened at a time when it is most needed, if not valued, a time when qualitative survival in an increasingly disordered and impersonal world may depend on those deep sources of human unity promoted by and embodied in the arts. It is Robert Heilbroner's prophesy in his essay called "The Human

Prospect," that if we are to rescue existence from "impending catastrophes of fearful dimensions," from the darkness, cruelty and disorder into which the race is rapidly plunging itself, "nothing less than the abandonment of uncongenial ways of life and the dangerous mentality of industrial civilization" is required. It is to this end, call it moral awakening, that the Humanities devotes itself, now as always, and is what this paper is primarily about.

I have said that the continued deterioration of world conditions since the writing of this essay makes more imperative than ever a commitment to the well-being of the Humanities. But given a corresponding deterioration of conditions in our more immediate, academic world, such a commitment may compell a will and effort of heroic proportions. We have all become nervously aware of the grim economic realities and the new, disconcerting element of commercialism that now influences important curriculum decisions in most universities. It was not necessary for us to see the NBC television special called "The Money Crunch" to become aware that we are running for our lives, running in search of students, and of money to support our programs. Entire departments are phased out of existence, whole colleges disappear if in the ruthless competition of the university market place they do not prove economically feasible, do not place bodies, warm or cold, en masse in the classrooms, students on the assembly line. We advertise courses now like so many bright and shiny new cars, wooing students to our classes not on the basis of substantive principle, but on trade-in value. Woe be it then to those without moral energy for the fight, those who have only art works of lasting value to offer, and instruction in the efficacy and beauty of the written word.

In light of the Freshman English committee's decision to avoid doing battle with the President, and to take the conciliatory route of arguing that perhaps a "service" course was better after all, one more demonstrably "relevant" to the student's real life needs, I could not resist prefacing the paper as it originally stood with these lines from Eliot's "Prufrock":

> Do I dare
> Disturb the universe?
> . . . .
> I am no prophet--and here's no great matter;
> I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
> And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
> And in short, I was afraid.
> . . . .
> Deferential, glad to be of use,
> Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
> Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
> At times, indeed, almost ridiculous--
> Almost, at times, the Fool.

I called my expose "An Immodest, Open Letter to the English Department from a Disgruntled member of the Freshman English Committee," though I was not merely disgruntled; I was sizzling mad. And with considerable revision, this is how it read.

In the sanctity of their classrooms and in the anonymous prefaces to their textbooks, English teachers have for a long time been safely uttering noble sentiments about the educational value of literature. But in one English Department at least, the sudden administrative pressure to "account" more openly for the study of imaginative literature, particularly as a function of the Freshman English program, has produced a good deal of squirming and a spirit more accommodating than noble. It seems that under the scrutiny of potentially skeptical administrators, many teachers would rather switch to a defense of Freshman English as a "service" course than try to justify the study of imaginative literature as a workable part of that course--or perhaps

even to justify it at all.

Such evasion is regrettable, but understandable. English teachers are, on the whole, a drab, timid lot. Most would rather spend their time explaining and defending the practical value of visible, mechanical skills, which can make the student a more efficient, more economically successful member of the labor market, than trying to demonstrate the utility value of a great piece of literature. Mechanical skills are easy to attain and simple to teach and measure. The relatively intangible benefits of literature--made up of words and ideas, sounds and pigments, questions rather than answers, emotions and passions, are less weighable and controllable--less translatable into dollar and cents value. And the subtlty of its processes make it more difficult to teach.

Perhaps, in an age where rationality, self-control and mechanical efficiency are the celebrated virtues, it is the emotional content of literature that some teachers are least anxious to be identified with or to defend. Not only does it take less energy and conviction to speak of paragraph development than of human development, or of the formulation of a good thesis sentence than of the formulation of humanistic values, but it relieves one of having to speak of those awful, old sentimental verities--love, honor, dignity, beauty, compassion--the ancient truths of great literature which remind us of what it means to be a human being--whose mention, horror of horrors, may call our very manhood into question.

One wonders whether this unwillingness to sound aloud a committment to the study of literature as an essential part of the students's education stems from mere timidness under fire, or whether it suggests a greater hypocrisy--a cynical disbelief in the reality behind the noble sentiments safely uttered in

textbooks and classrooms. Perhaps it is simply a matter of weariness, and some teachers would be happier and more effective selling insurance or used cars, or as undertakers. Perhaps it is a silence bred of too-long frustration in the face of the more popular, competing realities: the oftentimes superficial stimulation of the world of mass communication, the world of the jukebox, television and films. Or perhaps, with some, faith in what they are doing has dwindled with age. Whatever the case, the crowning irony of our inability to shout out our convictions, to carry our enthusiasms, when they exist, outside the classroom or prefaces to textbooks into the market place or into the administration building, is that we have become our own worst antagonists. We lend support to those dual,misguided notions that poems, stories, novels and plays are remote from so-called real-life needs, and that they are the mere indulgences of a literary elite--the fitting province only for "English-major types."

But by our passive acquiesence, we do a worse harm. We perpetuate the continuing belief that the writer's contribution is really secondary to the conventional, material aims and ideologies of our society. We accelerate the diminishing importance of literature in a world given over more and more to technological advance, physical abundance and mass enjoyment--all prefigured for us in Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. Maybe we are waiting to assert ourselves when we are finally placed in the position of medieval monks--truly cloistered from society and reduced to the task of mere preservation. Or when books are at last outlawed, and the book-burners of Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 start their fires. But maybe by then we will all have become like the character in Ionesco's "Rhinoceros," who is more concerned with fitting in than fighting for the humanistic values he had always believed in, whose

resistance to giving up his human identity and assuming animal form is finally overcome by the animalistic trumpetings around him which pressure him to conform. After all, he concludes, speaking his last words as a human being: "One must keep up with one's times!"

To those who are about to deliver us into the soulless domain of faulty syntax, libelous spelling errors and the intricacies of the business letter--the kind of approach to the English language that is sure to kill off interest before the student ever has a chance to glimpse its potential for power or beauty--there are a few, quite old-fashioned observations offered here about the educational value of poems, plays, novels and stories.

If the writer's tone begins to take on at this point a certain religious fervor, he can at least promise that there will be no call for a singing of hymns or passing of the collection plate. But in a very real sense, "salvation" --the kind of salvation that can come from reading great literature--is the subject of what follows. In Archibald MacLeish's play, J. B., which is about a modern day Job upon whom is visited all the calamities faced by the Job in the Bible, the author poses three solutions or remedies to which twentieth-century man has turned for meaning and comfort: psychiatry, religion and communism. Ultimately, the author tries to show us that any one of these institutionalized approaches to salvation is too limited, too exclusive and too mechanical to provide either a satisfactory explanation of or cure for man's moral confusion in the modern world. He concludes that it is no particular organization, but simply the force of love that can best provide this source of comfort and purpose as an antidote to chaos and alienation. The end of the play is a kind of plea for men to open up their hearts to one another. Rather as poet W. H. Auden says it, he asks that "in the deserts of the heart, let the healing fountains start."

But, asks the tough-minded man of practicality, what has all this got to do with curing cancer or erecting cities or combating poverty? What "service" does it perform in a society primarily dedicated to solving the problems of an advanced, technological and industrialized world? At a time when tensions in our society between political groups, between races and individuals, seems to threaten the very future of that society, when fear, distrust and hatred are the norms and increasing mechanization continues more than ever to diminish man's sense of self-worth, one wonders what greater service could be offered to the young student who must learn to cope with such a world than that which helps "the healing fountains start." This age-old function of great literature--to enlarge our sympathies, to teach us to act more charitably toward one another, to be more forgiving--could not be more timely or "relevant." It has never been more important for people in the world to get to understand one another, to cease being stupidly suspicious of one another and to develop the spirit of cooperation through mutual tolerance and respect. People in the past have been able to isolate themselves and to nourish prejudices where the human spirit and integrity are concerned, but the threat of nuclear war and, more recently, racial war, has awakened most of the world to the need for a sharp change in philosophy. We're beginning to recognize that, as Hayakawa puts it, if we don't hang together we shall surely hang separately: cooperation has become essential to survival.

It is literature, then, which to a large extent can provide us with the necessary awareness and sympathies to remain human in a dehumanized age. One could point easily to the work of such diverse writers as Shakespeare, Whitman, Crane, Hemingway or Camus for ready and dramatic examples of the way in which

literature promotes compassion by teaching us an awareness of others and thus advances the cause of human solidarity. But good literature compels self-awareness as well. It provides us with comparisons in character and philosphy so that we may learn who we are and where to place ourselves in a society where character is formed basically by materialistic motivation. The writer is a man with a tenacious desire to see things as they really are as opposed to the way they ought to be, or as we are told they are; he teaches us to sift the relevant from the irrelevant, the lasting from ephemeral. He helps us to form an identity in accordance with goals and values that are humanly and personally fulfilling rather than with those that promote success in the business world--those that are fostered by Hollywood movie makers or advertizers from Madison Avenue.

It sometimes seems to me that the singular tragedy of American society is that which Arthur Miller dramatizes for us in Death of a Salesman: the ultimate inadequacy of material possessions to satisfy the human spirit. If the English teacher wishes to be truly effective, truly of service to his young students, he might try teaching them through this play the tragic consequences of choosing one's life-work as a means to an end rather than as a source of daily enjoyment and fulfillment. This one work--this singular "service" alone--might well justify the course in Freshman English: to impress upon the young student at a time when he or she still can be impressed the importance of preparing for a life so lived that on their deathbeds they will not find themselves looking back with horror, like Willy Loman, upon a confused and empty life, wondering too late what it was all about.

If encouraging the young student to learn who he is or can be, to base his life-goals in his own values rather than those imposed upon him from outside,

and to do this at a time when the student's tentative wonderings especially need direction--a time when he is still open in mind and spirit--if this is not as important a service as teaching him paragraph form, then I suppose I have long been misguided about the purpose of a college education. But of course the final truth is that these two kinds of service are not incompatible after all, despite all the weary considerations to the contrary. The argument goes that the teacher is likely to become so caught up in teaching literature for its own sake that he will be distracted from the real task of teaching writing. Certainly it is true that the teacher will want to explain to his students the value of literature as an end in itself--as something worth knowing and praising for its own sake, for the sake of truth or the sake of beauty, or as an expression of man's capacity for creative transcendance. The presence of truth and beauty is, after all, humanizing in itself. And the teacher will want to say something too about the intricacies and subtleties of form by which the writer makes his statement--those elements which give his work artistic depth and emotional resonance. Only, in fact, when the artist has handled the mechanics of his craft well will his vision truly represent life--the pain and sorrow, the passion and the beauty, that cause "the healing fountains to start."

But the teacher of Freshman English need not become so engrossed in explicating the writer's art that the student's writing needs are slighted. In so far as the teacher concentrates on literature not as an end in itself, but as human communication in its fullest, richest and most profound form, the goals of teaching literature as a humanizing force and as a means of instructing the student in the processes of effective communication can be joyously combined. What better way to interest the student in language as a

practical means of shaping and controlling his destiny than to demonstrate it in its greatest potential for persuading or moving or affecting others. I would even suggest that there is far more harm than good to be done in disassociating the creative writer's task from that of the student's in the composition class.

That the creative writer's craft is too removed from that of the student's to be able to draw useful parallels is preposterously untrue. It is just as possible to build a lopsided story as it is to build a poorly constructed paragraph, and such primary concerns as point of view, tone, form and diction are equally pertinent to each kind of writing and absolutely relatable. The student may even take heart in learning that the writer's struggle with method to achieve desired effects can be as frustrating and confounding as his own--or as rewarding. Or in finding out that the seeming inevitability of phrasing present in great writing is more often a product of perspiration than inspiration--the result of a constant struggle to get the right word in the right place. Probably the greatest affinity between the two kinds of writing lies in the value of connotative devices and descriptive details. Not only can the student learn to write more lively and colorfully by studying the descriptive effects of the creative writer, but it is conceivable that in opening up the student's imagination to the myriad resources of language from which the creative writer draws, we may even convince him that writing can become something that is fun to do.

To say, then, that literature and writing cannot be taught together seems to me the ultimate evasion of defending the use of imaginative literature in Freshman English. The teacher of this course can be far more than a mere writing technician. For far from being an escape or distraction from "real-life" problems or the problems of composition, the study of great literature can be one of the most palatable and powerfully instructive ways of helping the student meet those problems. Good literature, if it is any kind of escape, is an escape into life and not away from it. So how much better to teach the basic skills of composition while helping the student to grow intellectually and emotionally as well. This is "service."